

Television / Radio



Charlotte Moorman in her "video bra"—"no longer a scandal"

TV VIEW

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Moving Into X-Rated TV

Television can be—in fact, must be—viewed from many angles. Several of the more intriguing angles were employed recently at the Bonino Gallery in downtown Manhattan's SoHo district. The event was supervised by Nam June Paik, a Korean-American electronics magician who, as his press release notes in dutiful seriousness, is often called "the slant-eyed George Washington of the Video Movement." Paik was assisted by Charlotte Moorman, cellist and, by general consent, earth mother of the avant-garde, wherever it may be these days. The gallery event coincided with the showing on Channel 13 at 10:30 P.M. of a half-hour program entitled "Nam June Paik—Edited for TV."

Anyone entering the gallery at about 10 o'clock would have found Miss Moorman sitting on a high stool while being outfitted in her "video bra," a contraption she and Paik devised in 1969. A miniature TV set is attached to each of her bare breasts. Paik and another assistant were completing the operation with a large quantity of adhesive tape. "The two of you are marvelous," Miss Moorman allowed.

In addition, off to the right of Miss Moorman, an Advent machine was projecting the broadcast TV picture onto a 90-inch-diagonal screen. And about 20 standard TV sets were operating, face down, on the ceiling of the gallery. The gallery audience was thus afforded several choices for its TV watching, but Paik went further. He announced if it got too crowded, "you can go to the bar next door and look at its set." Miss Moorman said, "Bring me back a beer."

True to the exigencies of real time, Channel 13's program

began precisely at 10:30. The host was Russell Connor, and the interviewer was Calvin Tomkins, who wrote a profile of Paik in *The New Yorker* magazine last year. Tomkins wasted no time in getting to the major thrusts of Paik's work, beginning with the declaration to "turn art upside down . . . to demolish it completely." One dominant theme: Everybody is suffering from information overload. Another: Paik's confession that "I have to entertain people every second."

Miss Moorman was seen in a 1970 tape of her performing in her video bra, using the bare back of Paik as her cello; she employed her bow tenderly in time to the sounds of a TV set but occasionally smashed her first fist into his head. At the same time, off to the side of the giant screen, the real cellist and her human instrument were re-creating the original scene for the live gallery audience. The 1970 program, the Channel 13 interview and the "live" occasion were intertwined dizzily in a show-and-tell demonstration of abstract time.

For this observer, the proceedings took a more curious turn with Paik's reactions to the sound of his own voice. In the interview program itself, he had been quite talkative (his accented comments being translated with subtitles), almost expansive. While watching the program, though, he would make loud sounds in the gallery to drown out the audio track whenever he began to explain himself at any length. It was as if he furiously resented being categorized, being pigeon-holed, even by himself.

To be explained, it seems, is to be caught, trapped, threatened with the prospect of becoming a salable commodity. In fact, the Bonino event underlined how the real time of television is competing with such excursions into abstract time with frightening rapidity. In 1969, Miss Moorman's video bra was able to create something of a sensation, even scandal, as both gesture and symbol. The nation, or at least the vast majority of its citizens, seemed to have reverted quite contentedly to electronic breastfeeding. At the same time, the miniature sets were attached to parts of the human anatomy that, unadorned, could not be shown on the medium of family entertainment. No longer.

Now Miss Moorman and her video bra can, quite legitimately, be part of a program on public television. And consider some of the other content that was available on TV the same week as the gallery event. The week happened to be part of a "sweep" ratings period for local stations, a time when programming competition becomes noticeably active. For the local news shows, apparently nothing is more prominent in the public mind than sex. Several of these newscasts scheduled special mini-series on sexual enlightenment or blight in the big city and its suburbs. WNBC's NewsCenter 4, for instance, offered the "The Sex Connection," featuring installments on such titillating subjects as porno movies, sex fantasies and sado-masochism. The latter item was shown only on the 11 P.M. new edition after being deemed too risky for early-evening audiences. We have now, evidently, reached the sophisticated stage of X-rated TV news.

The report on porno movies, which was indeed shown in the early evening, featured a reporter standing in front of assorted large-screen porno-film projections, explaining that movies such as "Deep Throat" were making a lot of money and, presumably, were therefore worthy of respectful attention. A porno star was seen watching one of her own movies, while several "producers," in dark suits, moustaches and expensive hairdos, hovered about her. The moneylenders have obviously taken over the temple, but the NewsCenter 4 essay maintained its "objectivity," pretending that the subject was no more sensational than, say, a report on potholes.

Meanwhile, on cable television in Manhattan, a video production of *Screw* magazine was being shown at midnight three times during the week. Segments on a dog "brothel" and sexual-technique discussions were alternated with "commercials" of classified ads, featuring, among other things, one swinging couple in leather seeking contact with other like-minded couples.

At the conclusion of Nam June Paik's gallery event, a producer for German television asked a spectator the meaning of "cultural terrorism," a term used in the Channel 13 program. Perhaps it is merely a refusal to take seriously the self-evaluations of popular-culture purveyors. The possibility of ridicule and contempt may be the only weapon left to terrify them. It is therefore essential that Paik and his sort be allowed "to entertain people every second."